
Review Essay

THE POLITICS OF LAND DEVELOPMENT IN URBANIZING CHINA

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George C. S. Lin, *Developing China: Land, Politics and Social Conditions*. London: Routledge, 2009. 343 pp. US\$145.00/£85.00 (hardcover and eBook), US\$47.95/£24.99 (paperback).

You-Tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 258 pp. US\$80.00/£50.00 (hardcover).

Over the past two decades, the conversion of farmland for urban, industrial and infrastructural construction has become a critical public policy issue globally. Nowhere has land development occurred more rapidly, or with more profound consequences for distributive politics, than around China's cities. Accordingly, urban studies of China have surged, and the focus of inquiry has shifted from the city as a symbol of modernity and vector of governance and social differentiation to the city as a field of accumulation.¹ Particular attention has centered on the fiscal incentives motivating governments to expropriate land for development.² It is widely accepted now that land enclosure has become a key strategy of local government financing and urban capital accumulation. In 2009, for example, China's press reported that national revenue from the conveyancing and allocation of use rights to state-owned land increased by 63 per cent over the previous year, to nearly 1.6 trillion yuan.³ Most of that income was

¹ See Laurence J. C. Ma, "The State of the Field of Urban China", *China Information*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2006), pp. 363-89.

² One of the strongest academic papers on this subject is Zhou Feizhou's "Shengcai you dao: tudi kaifa he zhuanrang zhong de zhengfu he nongmin" (Expertise in Money-making: Governments and Villagers in the Development and Transfer of Land), *Shehuixue yanjiu* (Sociological Research), No. 1 (2007), pp. 49-82.

³ "Qunian quanguo 'maidi' shouru jin 1.6 wan yi yuan" (Last Year's National Income from Land Sales Nears 1.6 Trillion Yuan), *China Daily* (3 February 2010), retrieved 18 April 2011 from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqgj/2010-02/03/content_9420885.htm. Note that the

retained by sub-provincial governments: Hangzhou City alone earned more than 105 billion yuan.⁴ In the same year, however, all those across the country whose land was taken and whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed in the course of development received only 518 billion yuan in compensation.⁵ Another body of research has detailed the plight of the *shidi nongmin* (失地农民), “land-losing villagers”, the risks that they pose politically, socially and economically, and policy solutions to the injustices associated with land development.⁶ Yet, if local governments’ revenue hunger is driving land development and villagers’ dispossession nation-wide, why is there such marked inter- and intra-regional variation in how governments and communities interact to develop land? Why is land development enriching some “land-losing villagers”, and impoverishing and scattering others?

George Lin’s *Developing China: Land, Politics and Social Conditions* and You-Tien Hsing’s *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China* offer contrasting answers to these questions. The contrast is not solely a consequence of their distinctive theoretical and methodological approaches, temporal framing, the sources and sites drawn upon in their research, or even the explanatory weight placed on the roles played by cities compared to other actors. Rather, they reflect the authors’ pursuit of quite different goals. Whereas Hsing seeks to develop a single conceptual framework that causally links land development with territorial struggles over the local state’s strategies of “accumulation by dispossession” and communities’ resistance, Lin is intent on demonstrating why no single model can adequately explain the heterogeneous character of land development in China. Given the magnitude of these differences, and the empirical and analytical richness of both, I will discuss each book in turn, evaluating which provides the more robust explanations of who gets what, why and how from land developments in different places, and what new political and social practices are arising from land development.

quoted sum does not include other land taxes and fees, such as the fixed asset investment adjustment tax, land appreciation tax, urban maintenance and construction tax, contract tax, stamp duties, fees for the development of agricultural land and resettlement of villagers, advertising and offsetting land use conservation quotas, or additional land use fees levied by departments such as agriculture, housing property, water, traffic and forestry.

⁴ “2009 nian Zhongguo tudi churang jin da 15000 yi yuan: Hangzhou quanguo di yi” (China’s Income from Land Sales in 2009 Exceeds 1.5 Trillion Yuan: Hangzhou Tops the Country). Retrieved 18 April 2011 from <http://www.fdc.soufun.com/news/2010-01-07/3013338.htm>. The following year, 2010, total national revenue from land exceeded 7 trillion yuan, according to “Save Arable Land from Shrinking”, *China Daily* (12 January 2011), retrieved 18 April 2011 from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/usa/life/2011-01/12/content_11848807.htm.

⁵ Feng Xingyuan, “Tudi caizheng, difang zhengfu rongzi pingtai yu guize” (Land Coffers, Local Governments’ Financing Platforms and Procedures) (2010), retrieved 6 May 2011 from http://rdi.cass/show_News.asp?id=31317&key=?.

⁶ Over the past decade, more than 2000 articles have been published on these topics in China’s social science journals. See Sally Sargeson, “Villains, Victims and Aspiring Proprietors: Framing ‘Land-losing Villagers’ in China’s Strategies of Accumulation”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 20, No. 71 (2011) (forthcoming).

Developing China: Land, Politics and Social Conditions is mis-titled: politics is examined only in so far as it involves government and institutions, and comparatively little attention is given to social conditions. That said, this is an immensely informative brick of a book. Lin sets out to dispel myths regarding property rights in land, elucidate temporal and regional changes in land use, and identify the political, institutional and economic forces driving the conversion of farmland to non-agricultural use. Based on an analysis of several strong sources of evidence, including national and local statistical data and government documents, the 1996 national land survey, Landsat and aerial photographic images taken in 1988 and 2000, and extensive field investigations in four provinces, Lin makes a strong case for exploring land development in China through a comparative study of histories of policy implementation and land use in specific places, rather than through the application of a pre-conceived theoretical model.

From the outset, this approach to the subject of his inquiry distinguishes Lin's book from studies that explain irrational land development as a consequence of the institutional inconsistencies arising from China's dual system of state-owned (urban) and collectively-owned (rural) land. Created in the 1950s, the system provided that, "in the public interest", land could be transferred between ownership sectors through governments' exercise of eminent domain. When markets in urban land leases were opened in the 1980s, only state-owned land could be traded for development. Governments thereby acquired a monopoly over the transfer of land into primary markets and thus over opportunities to attract investment into their jurisdictions and multiply their revenue by expropriating land at low cost from rural collective owners. Numerous scholars have argued that these institutional arrangements led to inefficient land development.⁷ A counter proposition, propounded by Peter Ho,⁸ among others, is that ambiguities in property rights in land have given the state the flexibility to expand markets, control the speed of land development and respond to what David Zweig dubbed the "externalities of development".⁹ Lin does not deny that those institutional inconsistencies are significant; on the contrary, he acknowledges that they matter a great deal for contemporary distributive politics. Rather, it is with the notion that a property right in land is what he calls "the independent *explanum*" (p. 37) for recent trends in land development that Lin takes issue.¹⁰ Instead, he argues, the definition of land rights "exists and operates as the *explanandum*" (p. 37).

⁷ See, for example, Keliang Zhu, "Urban Development under Ambiguous Property Rights: A Case of China's Transition Economy", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2002), pp. 41-57.

⁸ Peter Ho, "Who Owns China's Land? Policies, Property Rights and Deliberate Institutional Ambiguity", *The China Quarterly*, No. 166 (June 2001), pp. 387-414.

⁹ David Zweig, "The 'Externalities of Development': Can New Political Institutions Manage Rural Conflict?", in Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (eds), *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 120-42.

¹⁰ Lin uses *explanum* to refer to an independent variable, whereas an *explanandum* is that which has to be explained.

Nor is Lin entirely persuaded by other prominent theorizations of land development. For example, to those who would argue that China's land developments are engineered by "urban growth regimes", he counters that development is not shaped solely or, perhaps, even principally, by governments' efforts to capture exchange value from land. To those who interpret land development as an effect of local state or village corporatism, he sides with the small group of experts who have cautioned that land developments also reflect the conservation and security objectives and regulatory strategies of the central state.¹¹

How, then, does Lin explain the speed, scale and heterogeneity of land developments in China? The crux of his argument is that land development reflects the conflicting motives and practices of multiple actors operating in diverse geographic, political, economic and social contexts. Decentralization of the state's governing functions has complicated interactions between the central leadership (which remains committed to maintaining public ownership of land, national food security and social stability), local governments bent on using land to spur investment and employment as well as revenue, village collectives and households keen both to capitalize on the land and to defend local livelihoods, and the myriad commercial consumers of land.

Two overlapping patterns of land development ensue: city-centered urban expansion, and rural industrialization and urbanization. Lin maps the evolution of these national patterns and processes of land development meticulously in the second part of the book, then illustrates them empirically in three regional case studies. Guangzhou and Hefei are selected to illustrate municipal expansion. Over two decades, inter-regional economic competition inspired government "place-making" that centered on the construction of extensive development zones and transport infrastructure, doubling the land area within municipal boundaries. More remarkable than spatial growth of China's metropolises, though, is that a far greater area of land has been used in the construction of rural industry and of small and medium settlements. In Jiangsu, for example, Lin shows, that between 1984 and 1996, the built-up area of small cities increased by 745 per cent, and the population by 841 per cent (p. 233). Similar rates of expansion occurred in towns. The final case study, of Guangdong Province, illuminates the interaction of governments at all levels of scale in mobilizing land resources, diasporic connections and proximity to export markets to create places attractive to investment. Since 1979, Guangdong has been permitted to implement "special" policies relating to land leasing. Hence, even compared to other coastal provinces, the speed, scale and morphologies of both city-centered growth and rural industrialization in Guangdong have been atypical. To achieve their respective goals of farmland conservation and capital accumulation, in the 2000s central and provincial governments have also cooperated to rationalize land development by reassigning local cadres opposed to cities' annexation of

¹¹ Jiang Xu and Anthony Yeh, "Decoding Urban Land Governance: State Reconstruction in Contemporary Chinese Cities", *Urban Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2009), pp. 559-81.

surrounding counties, facilitating the expropriation of collective land and constructing infrastructure networking urban and rural areas.

Lin's detailed discussion of land development in the Yangtze and Pearl River deltas invites us to reconsider or, perhaps, invert Frederick Mote's view of cities as dense agglomerations of an essentially rural culture, and instead to look for qualities of urbanity in the contemporary countryside.¹² In this regard, Lin's study implicitly poses a challenge to scholars like William Hurst and You-Tien Hsing, for whom cities are the locus of the *polis*, well-springs of political dynamism.¹³ However, because the reach of Lin's political analysis encompasses only inter-governmental interactions and institutions and his empirical data centers on area, demography and economy, his book also fails to meet this challenge. Contestation *between* governments and rural communities and *among* members of rural communities is overlooked as a factor influencing land development and mediating the social outcomes of development. Thus, while Lin's book reveals much about why and how land developments have occurred at different times, in different ways, to the benefit of various levels of government in particular places, it offers little insight into how villagers' activism influenced those distributive outcomes, and what social changes resulted from the development of those places.

In contrast to Lin's rejection of the analytic utility of a single conceptual framework, in *The Great Urban Transformation* You-Tien Hsing sets out an innovative model in which the distributive politics and social outcomes of land development are explained as effects of territorial struggles unleashed by the "urbanization of the local state". On the one hand, Hsing follows Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey in arguing that governments' efforts to control land in order to sustain "accumulation through dispossession" and economies of demolition, relocation and urban construction now define, legitimate and express the urban basis of state power.¹⁴ On the other hand, communities in different places engage in counter-strategies of "civic territoriality" to resist dispossession and displacement.

This domination-resistance analytic is then projected onto a spatial typology that defines places and, more importantly, the distributive politics of people in those places, according to their proximity to urban administrative centers. The derived categories of place are the inner city, the urban-rural interface and the "remote rural fringe". Hence, whereas Lin provides no explicit theorization of space, Hsing's framework fetishizes it.

Succinctly stated on p. 14, the crux of her thesis is that:

... local governments use urban redevelopment powers to destroy, displace and rebuild, while inner city protesters make legal, historical, and moral claims over

¹² Frederick W. Mote, "The Transformation of Nanking, 1350-1400", in G. William Skinner (ed.), *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp. 101-54.

¹³ William Hurst, "The City as Focus: The Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Urban Politics", *China Information*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2006), pp. 457-79.

¹⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

their rights to property, housing and livelihood in the city. Similarly, as an urban government initiates expansion in neighboring villages, villagers at the rapidly growing urban fringe strategize to avoid displacement, take advantage of urban real-estate markets, and even manage to secure a relative territorial autonomy. Meanwhile, in the remote rural fringe areas, large numbers of displaced villagers lose economic, social and cultural resources and become deterritorialized.

Two problematic assumptions are implicit in this framework. The first assumption is that metropolitan spatial distribution parallels a scale of civic and political modernity, locating a rational, organized citizenry in the urban polis and a muddle of “peasants” in the hinterlands. As Hsing explains, “in the urban core, activists mobilize territorial strategies to protect their entitlement to property, place and a livelihood in the city ... They employ territorial rhetoric and the logic of location and relocation in the legal mobilization for property rights and residents’ rights ... At the rural fringe, in contrast, displaced and dispossessed peasants are weakened economically and organizationally and their collective identity dissipates. Displaced and dispossessed peasants are deterritorialized, undermining their political capacity to organize sustainable collective action” (p. 218). The quote aptly illuminates the second assumption: spatially discrete processes of “civic territoriality” and “deterritorialization” are self-reinforcing determinants of the political capacity of actors.

Drawing on a decade of interviews and ethnographic observation in several cities in eastern and central China, Hsing elaborates her thesis in case studies of state urbanization and distributive politics in each of the three place categories. Beijing, where the skyrocketing value of state-owned land has sparked fierce territorial struggles among municipal governments and “socialist land masters”, and where groups of residents mobilize to assert their rights against state landlords, serves as the exemplar of land politics in the urban core. At the ever-shifting urban–rural interface, her study of the construction of urban development zones, university towns and “new cities” by municipal governments in different regions is paired with an analysis of corporatist villages in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, where “village collective organization and individual villagers accumulate fortunes from real estate, the territorial autonomy of the villages is reinforced by continued occupation of the village site, renewed collective identity with the village, and the evolving self-organization of villagers around their collective fortunes” (p. 126). In the “remote rural fringe”, township governments still act, she writes, as brokers of power and property, while village agriculturalists, lacking organizational, legal and material resources with which to resist, are dispossessed of both territory and collective identity.

It is precisely the neatness of Hsing’s conceptual framework and the diligence with which she prosecutes her case by reference to findings from field research in each of the three places that makes her argument about the distributive politics of land development theoretically plausible, and yet seriously flawed. Hsing’s compelling images of variations in state territorial predation and residents’ defensive activism have been winnowed from a small number of the sites she visited. While these images might indeed represent the broad, complex spectrum of politics centering on land development, they do not tidily slot into the coordinates of Hsing’s spatial typology.

Indeed, an ironic consequence of this typology is that greater distance from the urban core correlates with a decline, not only in the extent to which she detects evidence of “civic territoriality”, but also in the reliability of her interpretation.

This weakness is disclosed through a close reading of her accounts of distributive politics at the urban margin and the “remote rural fringe”. Essential to Hsing’s scenario is that villagers at the urban margins are able to organize collectively to achieve a degree of territorial autonomy, remain *in situ* as *chengzhong cun* (城中村), “villages-in-the-city”, and “retain constitutionally recognized collective rights over village land” because of their shared lineage, land-centred identity and corporatist economy. Given Lin’s comments on the a-typicality of land development in Guangdong, it seems unwise to use *chengzhong cun* in Guangzhou and Shenzhen to validate a general argument about land politics. These are, however, Hsing’s chosen demonstration sites. Yet even here, the argument is not proven. In her archetypal urban fringe site, Shuping Village, land was expropriated over 100 times between the 1950s and 2000s, in 1997 all villagers were re-registered as urban residents, and residents now only have rights in buildings and businesses built on a fraction of their former lands. It is simply wrong to imply that they retain collective ownership of the land. Objectively, Shuping’s history registers a relentless process of dispossession more symptomatic, according to Hsing’s framework, of the distributive politics of the rural fringe. This leads me to suspect that the “successful story of civic territoriality” (p. 140) currently narrated by Shuping villagers might actually be informed more by recent economic growth and inflation in the value of their real estate than by corporatist politics.

Moreover, when the focus of inquiry shifts away from Hsing’s Guangdong sites, it is by no means clear which independent variables shape distributive politics in the urban margins. If corporatism is the key, why have the former members of non-corporatist, non-share-owning villages in that land-taking metropolis *par excellence*, Hangzhou, also been enriched by land developments? Research on a single-lineage *chengzhong cun* in Fujian shows that lineage is no determinant of collective distribution, welfare and identity, for there vast inequalities in power between residents translate into unequal entitlement to land compensation, which fuel feelings of insecurity and anger.¹⁵ If a land-centered identity or remaining *in situ* during the course of development are the critical ingredients, how can we explain the wealth and political influence wielded by the Ningbo “village” shareholding corporations whose owners have chosen to move into luxury housing complexes across the city? In short, Hsing’s characterization of distributive politics in the urban fringe is simply not transferable to other sites.

Further problems arise from Hsing’s eagerness to fit land politics at the “remote rural fringe” into her theoretical framework. Here, the goals and regulatory reach of higher authorities and the institutional changes documented by Lin are largely ignored. For example, the 1999 Land Administration Law removed township governments’ unilateral authority to plan land use and expropriate and transact parcels of land. To be sure, there is a gap between legislation and implementation.

¹⁵ Sally Sargeson and Song Yu, “Land Expropriation and the Gender Politics of Citizenship in the Urban Frontier”, *The China Journal*, No. 64 (2010), pp. 19-45.

Nevertheless, it is misleading to portray township leaders, as Hsing does, as the unaccountable planners, takers and developers of village land.

As comparatively little of the field research for this book was conducted in “remote” villages, Hsing relies rather heavily on the figures from and descriptions of land-losing “peasants” produced by Yu Jianrong and Li Changjin to flesh out her thesis in this regard. She acknowledges that “[l]ike their urban counterparts, displaced peasants engage in protests against forced eviction and demand fair compensation” (pp. 183-84), yet she accepts at face value the image conveyed by Yu and Li, and strategically projected by many “land-losing” protesters, that these “peasants” are powerless to protect their property and livelihoods, much less capitalize on land developments. Her use of the term “peasant” here is telling. It glosses over social stratifications and gender and generational differences amongst villagers. More importantly, set in counterpoint to her references to “activists” at the core and organized “corporatist villagers” at the margins, it serves to head off any suspicions that some “peasants” might share the same conceptual horizons and institutional and organizational resources as their urbanized peers. Having baldly denied “peasants” agency, Hsing also denies her readers the opportunity to consider how, through their everyday industry, commerce, mimesis and experimentation, these “peasants” might participate (sometimes effectively) in the distributive politics of land development.

Indeed, while these two books provide us with, on the one hand, a detailed account of why and how temporally and regionally diverse patterns of urban expansion and rural industrialization have occurred to the benefit of governments and, on the other hand, a riveting, but specious, explanation of who gets what and how from land developments at different distances from metropolitan centers, neither book satisfactorily explores the broader significance of contemporary innovations in land development institutions and practices. Those innovations are arising from interactions among a wide array of actors with radically different agendas, involving conflicts *among* government departments and village members, as well as collusion, negotiation and bargaining *between* agents across different levels of geo-political scale. One important field of innovation entails the range of policies, procedures and practices through which governments at different levels and in different provinces are attempting to compensate “land-losing villagers”, by reintegrating them into urban regimes of capital accumulation, labor and welfare. This is one of the most intriguing dimensions of contemporary trajectories of land development, for it is intensifying the distinctiveness of regional governance and political economies across China. Another field of innovation has been opened up as villagers attempt to capitalize on the central leadership’s recent promises to allow rural collectives lease land for development. In order to understand the resulting politics of land development, I suggest that we forgo frameworks built around the familiar axes of rural and urban, domination and resistance, and attend to the construction of alliances, strategies and development practices among distributional coalitions that cut across geographic and administrative boundaries.